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THE SCANDINAVIAN ELEMENT IN AMERICAN POPULATION¹

OF the present population of the United States probably not less than three million persons are of pure Scandinavian stock, counting both the hundreds of thousands of Swedish, Norwegian, and Danish immigrants now living, and the descendants in the second and third generation of these and other immigrants of earlier years. As a considerable factor in the flight of the Teutonic tribes from Europe to America in the nineteenth century, a study of the native qualities of the Scandinavian immigrants, their numbers, and their motives in transplanting themselves to new soil, would be instructive. Of more immediate and vital concern, however, are the consequences to the Republic, which have followed their settlement, for it is obvious that the social and economic meaning of these seven figures would be vastly different if they stood for the same number of gambling gypsies, Chinese coolies, Mexican peons, or recruits from the proletariat of the south or west of Europe.

The final test of the value of any alien element in the population of a nation must always be its capacity for amalgamation with the better part of the adopting country, its ability and willingness to contribute positively and progressively to the upbuilding of the institutions and spirit of the nation whose life it shares. The Scandinavians have so often shown an exceptional power of adaptability in matters social and political that their large participation in the immigration movement from Europe during the last sixty years makes reasonable the presumption of large benefits to accrue from their coming to America. One of the great advantages which they possess for the enrichment of their chosen country lies in the freedom and education under which they have grown up in the Northern kingdoms, and in the fact that they have brought with them scanty luggage of social distinctions, class traditions, and ecclesiastical obligations.

The Swedish colony on the Delaware River in the middle of the seventeenth century, content in its quiet frontier plenty, was a significant forerunner of the great hosts of their emigrating kinsmen

¹ The substance of this paper was read at the New York meeting of the American Historical Association, December 31, 1909.

of the nineteenth century. Nearly fifty years after the founding of this colony of the Swedish crown, William Penn commented on its prosperity, and added: "They have fine children, and almost every house full: rare to find one of them without three or four boys and as many girls; some six, seven, and eight sons. And I must do them that right, I see few young men more sober and laborious."² But the narrow Atlantic coast was not to be the site of the New Sweden. Complications of European politics and the undeveloped state of the right of expatriation postponed for two hundred years the exodus of the children of the North, till finally, in the course of migration events, rare and attractive opportunities in the newer and vaster American West combined with industrial unrest in the northern peninsulas of Europe to produce a veritable army of emigrants who scrupled little to leave the three Norse kingdoms and enlist as citizens under a foreign flag.

This immigration reached its high-water mark in 1882, when more than 105,000 Scandinavians reached America, the major part of them going directly into the West, very few stopping east of Chicago. Another period of prosperity in the Upper Mississippi Valley, quite as much industrial as agricultural, produced another record of 77,000 of the same sort of immigrants in 1903, but by no means so large a proportion of them went into the agricultural sections of the Northwest as in the earlier decades.

The longing for land, the determination to own a farm at the earliest possible moment, is the most significant fact in the story of the influence of Scandinavian immigration to the United States. The call of the wild, rich, boundless western prairie, to be had in quarter sections, almost for the asking, with water and wood and fish and game near by, fell upon eager hearts in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark, where the areas of good land were narrowly limited by nature, subjected to many customary restrictions, and to be purchased, if purchasable at all, only with a great price in money and effort. The words of the call came in familiar tongues, in letters from adventurers into the new West, in interviews with prosperous immigrants who returned to visit their old home parishes, in circulars and in immigrant guide-books sent out by states, counties, railroads, and land companies. Agents were sent like missionaries to preach enthusiastically and effectively the gospel of Minnesota's or Wisconsin's or Dakota's industrial and agricultural advantages. The appeal was quite as much to the imagination as to the understanding; the response was made by the bravest, sturdiest, and most

² Janney, *Life of William Penn*, p. 236.

ambitious. The inspiration, the release of spiritual energies, and the development of new powers of activity and effort, in the process of adjustment to American conditions, have been potent, persistent, subtle social factors, affecting two generations of the immigrants and their children's children of two more generations. Thus it came about that the prospective joys of owning a farm and of expanding its acreage, with the prosperity of the years and with the growth of the family, made the hardships of pioneering and the isolation of the frontier seem as very little things to the strong-limbed, sound-hearted, land-hungry Swedes, Norwegians, and Danes in the middle Northwest, as compared with their more gregarious cousins of western and southern Europe, who sought American cities, construction gangs, or mining camps.

The Norwegian immigration was the earliest, attaining considerable proportions in the late thirties and early forties of the last century, when Illinois and Wisconsin were bidding loudly for settlers, with Chicago and Milwaukee as competing ports of entry for fresh importations. Here grew up, especially in Dane, Jefferson, and Rock counties in southeastern Wisconsin, strong Norwegian colonies typical of later settlements, towards which later comers directed their steps and in which they rested for a few weeks or worked for a few months before seeking a permanent location where good land was cheaper than in the partially occupied regions. The Swedish movement, beginning with a small colony in Wisconsin in 1841, got its first large impetus in the Jansonist communistic-religious settlement in Henry County in Illinois between 1846 and 1850. By 1860 both the Swedes and the Norwegians were pushing into Minnesota and Iowa in large numbers. The four states just named claimed the bulk of the Viking immigrants for the next two decades. But good land at the minimum price of \$1.25 per acre was growing scarce even in Minnesota, and about 1880 Nebraska and the Dakotas were annexed to the new Scandinavia. In this manner was realized the prophetic vision of Frederika Bremer, the Swedish authoress and traveller, whose striking words, written in St. Paul in 1850, and published in her *Homes of the New World*, were widely read by her countrymen in Europe:

What a glorious new Scandinavia might not Minnesota become! Here would the Swede find again his clear, romantic lakes, the plains of Scania rich in corn, and the vallies of Norrland; here would the Norwegian find his rapid rivers, his lofty mountains, for I include the Rocky Mountains and Oregon in the new kingdom; and both nations, their hunting-fields and their fisheries. The Danes might here pasture their flocks and herds, and lay out their farms on richer and less misty

coasts than those of Denmark. . . . Scandinavians who are well off in the old country ought not to leave it. But such as are too much contracted at home, and who desire to emigrate, should come to Minnesota. The climate, the situation, the character of the scenery agrees with our people better than that of any other of the American States, and none of them appear to me to have a greater or a more beautiful future before them than Minnesota.³

This strong, normal movement of a mature, educated, purposeful people into the agricultural areas of the Upper Mississippi and Red River valleys naturally resulted in the grouping together of companies of Norwegians or Swedes or Danes in certain counties, just as, at a later time, there occurred a similar segregation by wards and precincts in the cities, when the percentage of artisans among the immigrants increased, and when the cities absorbed a larger proportion of the new arrivals. In this way Dane and Jefferson counties in Wisconsin, Winneshiek County in Iowa, Freeborn, Fillmore, Ottertail, and Goodhue counties in Minnesota, and Cass, Traill, and Grand Forks counties in North Dakota are strongly Norwegian; Winnebago in Illinois, Douglas and Burnett in Wisconsin, Chisago, Wright, and Nicollet in Minnesota are Swedish counties; while the Danes are numerous in Pottawatomie and Shelby counties in Iowa, Howard in Nebraska, and Pembina in North Dakota. In some of the newer counties, like Burnett and Polk in Wisconsin, Pope in Minnesota, and Griggs in North Dakota, the foreign-born Scandinavians in 1900 were very nearly one-fourth of the total population, and those of the second generation, native-born, were nearly another fourth.

In the city-ward movement of the last thirty years, the Scandinavians, immigrant and native-born, have taken part, and as a result, Chicago, Minneapolis, St. Paul, Omaha, and Rockford have large sections where the Swedish, Norwegian, or Danish elements predominate. In fact, Chicago ranks fourth among the cities of the world in its population of purely Scandinavian birth, while in the number of Swedes it ranks third. After liberal allowance has been made for this later movement to the cities, it appears from the census figures of 1900 that not above one-fifth of the persons of pure Norse blood in the United States live in cities of 25,000 population or over.

The comparative significance of this steady tendency of the immigrants from Northern Europe to go into agricultural sections may be roughly estimated in figures. Of the native Americans, one out of six engages in agriculture in some capacity; of the Germans in the United States, one out of seven; of the Irish, one out of twelve;

³ Bremer, *Homes of the New World*, II. 314-315.

while one out of every four of the Scandinavians may be classed as an agriculturist. Professor J. R. Commons, in the *Report of the Industrial Commission*, carries out the comparison even more strikingly, showing that the percentages of males "On Farms" in 1890 were: Danes 40 per cent., Swedes and Norwegians 38, Germans 27, Irish 14.7, Italians 5.8, and Hungarians 3.9.⁴

Another strong inducement offered by the West to the Scandinavian immigrants, besides the abundance of good lands, especially in the periods 1840-1860, 1870-1890, and 1898-1907, was the great demand, and high wages paid, for intelligent labor. Since many of the new arrivals had no capital beyond their accumulations of physical strength and common-sense, they must first serve at whatever tasks they could find, until enough money was saved to give them a start on their own farms. In the first two periods mentioned all the western states were exceedingly anxious to obtain settlers for their unoccupied lands, and the farmers who should take them up needed helpers. The construction of internal improvements like the out-reaching railroad systems could be carried on only by the aid of an abundance of laborers, who were not likely to be supplied to any considerable degree from the eastern states, for there the development of manufacturing and of transportation by land and sea was operating to keep up wages and to hold the laborer. The hard labor of the West and Farther West, therefore, must be done, if done at all, by those who had not already found their places in the industrial system of the country. For such services good wages, according to Eastern standards, were readily paid; according to Swedish and Norwegian standards, the wages were astonishingly liberal.

Experienced agricultural laborers in the Northwest about 1870 received nearly three times as high wages as the corresponding classes in Northern Europe, while the ratio for skilled labor was still higher.⁵ Even after the panic of 1873 the ratio remained nearly three to one in favor of the American scale. Such wages attracted many laborers, but not all were content to remain mere wage-earners. If they were men who would become permanent settlers when the railroad on whose construction gangs they worked was finished, and if they should desire earnestly to occupy vacant agricultural land tributary to the railroad, or perchance owned by the railroad company itself as a grant made by the government in aid of its building, so much the better for the railroad, for the county, and for the state as a whole. The Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes proved to be just the men wanted; they entered in and possessed the land.

⁴ *Report of the Industrial Commission*, XV. 301, 302.

⁵ Young, *Labor in Europe and America*, pp. 676, 696, 739.

The process thus described was repeated over and over again, in the building of the Rock Island Railroad through western Illinois, the Northern Pacific through Minnesota and North Dakota, and what is now the Great Northern northwest from St. Paul, through the Red River Valley, and across Dakota. The by-products of permanent settlement of railroad laborers in townships adjacent to the new line were vastly more important than the original services, and in striking contrast to the infinitesimal results of the same sort which followed where the construction was done, as in later instances, by Italians, Greeks, Poles, or Mexicans. The nuclei of Scandinavian settlements planted in this way along the new railroads of the middle Northwest were sure to grow, and the promoters of those great systems spared no pains or expense to attract such substantial settlers as the Swedes and Norwegians were found to be. The corporations offered real bargains, and they found thousands ready to snap them up. It might be truly said that it was faith in human nature, and especially in Swedish and Norwegian human nature, which led to the construction and profitable operation of hundreds of miles of railroads in Minnesota and the Dakotas without any subsidy whatever of land or bonds.

President James J. Hill of the Great Northern Railway Company, which was built without any land-grant, gave a concrete and very striking illustration of the results of this faith and of the cumulative economic contribution of the Scandinavian settlers, in a speech in 1902 in Crookston, in northern Minnesota, in the midst of a great Scandinavian region. For comparison with towns of North Dakota, he said,

I took the best towns [of the Red River Valley] outside of Crookston. . . . I will give you the annual business. Warren's last year's railroad business with our company was \$86,000; Hallock, \$94,000, a respectable sum; Stephen, \$87,000; Ada, \$81,000 . . . Langdon [in North Dakota] . . . away up towards the boundary, upon Pembina Mountain, \$210,000; Osnabrock, I hardly know where it is myself, \$101,000; Park River, \$170,000; Rolla, \$127,000; . . . Bottineau, away at the west end of the Turtle Mountains, where a few years ago people said it was too far away; could not live there and could not raise anything if they did live there, \$258,000.⁶

The transformation of the wilderness into farms and gardens, by Swedes as in Chisago County, and by Norwegians as in Goodhue and Ottertail counties, in Minnesota, finds its counterpart in hundreds of localities. The figures for assessments and valuations year by year are eloquent testimony to the value of Scandinavian energy, strength, and thrift in the Northwestern commonwealths. Unim-

⁶ *Northwest Magazine*, XX. 7-11.

proved areas diminish, and the class of "farm lands" expands surprisingly. The cash value of farms rises rapidly, along with the value of improvements. In two typical counties just named the increase in this cash value of farms was, for Chisago County, from \$1,171,426 in 1880 to \$2,563,630 in 1890, and for Ottertail County, from \$151,282 in 1870, to \$3,650,223 in 1880, to \$8,511,465 in 1890, and to \$12,478,640 in 1900.⁷ No one was crowded out or kept from coming into possession of what should have been his by any prior right in this creation of wealth. Notwithstanding the homestead law and the flat price of \$1.25 for public land, the land really went to the highest bidder, to the man who was willing to invest those primary essentials of success in agriculture—muscle, courage, intelligence, patience, and the future of himself and his children. Many a time success came so quickly that the Norse settler sold out his improved farm, moved to a new frontier, and reinvested himself and his capital in a larger venture, sometimes repeating the operation twice. No small part of the stability and soundness of North Dakota is due to men of this very class, who, coming from Iowa, Wisconsin, or Minnesota, combined experience, capital, and shrewdness in acquiring and developing new farms, and who in their ripe old age found themselves possessed of goodly estates, with grown sons and daughters well established in their own homes near by.

The eagerness for land-owning and the willingness to pay for it in the vital terms of hard work and courageous thrift has had far-reaching influence upon the political activity and citizenship of the Scandinavians. The period of service as a laborer was an apprenticeship in American ways; some knowledge of English was acquired; methods of business were gradually learned; land laws, regulations of transportation, and the process of naturalization were studied. With completed naturalization and the acquisition of land the journeyman stage was entered upon, and the liking for public affairs, particularly strong in the Norwegian, whose homeland has long been the most democratic of the Norse kingdoms, might be indulged almost indefinitely. Loving independence and freedom, and hating slavery cordially, the large numbers who settled in the Northwest in the ten years before the Civil War were almost inevitably allied with the anti-slavery movement and consequently with the Republican party at its formation, the "party of high moral ideas" as they liked to call it long after it ceased to merit that noble description.

The growth of agricultural settlements along the advancing frontier compelled early and continual training in the soundest principles

⁷ Reports of the United States Census.

and practices of American democracy, not for a few but for practically all the adult males. The purchasing of land required knowledge of federal laws and brought contact with federal officials. If the settlers had a post-office they must secure and operate it and the post-route, all under governmental direction. The towns and counties must be organized, and later there would be subdivision of these. The machinery of elections and local administration must be understood and made to work. The public school, almost invariably conducted in English from the start, was an early and willing responsibility. The levying and collecting of taxes, and the laying out of roads must be provided for. Over and over again these things were done well and promptly by men in whose veins coursed none but Norse blood; except for the peculiar names of men and towns, one would not suspect from the records that the town-makers were not born in Massachusetts or New York. In some cases more than one-fifth of the men of the community shared at first in the actual administration of town affairs. In the towns of Arendahl and Norway, in Fillmore County, Minnesota, all the officers at the first election, in 1860, were Norwegians; in the town of New Sweden, in the same state, four years later, thirty votes were cast at the first election, and six Swedes and four Norwegians filled all the offices.⁸ Twenty years, and even forty years, later these offices were filled in about the same way. In 1901 the town of Stoughton, Wisconsin, one of the oldest and richest of the Norwegian settlements, was officered by a mayor and seven councilmen of Norwegian birth or descent. In county affairs the same activity is to be observed during the last thirty years; Traill County, North Dakota, and Lac qui Parle and Yellow Medicine counties, Minnesota, elected in 1904 seven or eight Scandinavians out of a possible ten in the county offices.⁹ In 1893 one-fourth of all the sheriffs, treasurers, and registers of deeds in Minnesota and one-sixth of those of North Dakota were Scandinavians, approximately the same ratio as this element bore to the total population of the states.

But the Scandinavian as a journeyman in politics was not content; he would enter the rank of masters by sharing in state and national affairs and honors. He was a citizen, a man of property, education, and honesty; with many others of his nationality he had given honorable service in the Federal armies during the war; he soon offered a good record as an efficient county officer—and his countrymen were a numerous, ambitious, independent, and sensitive

⁸ *History of Fillmore County*, pp. 346, 376, 378, 392; *History of the Minnesota Valley*, pp. 688, 690.

⁹ *Amerika*, November 18, 1904.

company. They were apt pupils in the American school of practical politics. So early as 1870, the editor of a Norwegian newspaper in southern Minnesota declared that it was time for the 8000 Norwegian voters in that Congressional district to get a Representative in Congress, "just as well as other nationalities"—the Irish, for example—and he suggested a Norwegian convention, to be held the day before the regular Republican convention. Then if the Republicans refused "recognition", put on the screws!¹⁰ Twenty years later "the Scandinavians of North Dakota in mass convention assembled" organized the Scandinavian Union of North Dakota, to secure for themselves "that share in the government which their competency, their character, and numerical strength, and their rank as pioneers in all matters of civilization entitle them".¹¹ The chairman of this convention, Hon. M. N. Johnson, was later elected a Representative in Congress, and then United States Senator from North Dakota.

In Wisconsin, Minnesota, and the Dakotas, it is now taken for granted that the state tickets, and very many of the county and municipal tickets will "recognize" the Scandinavian voters by nominating some of their number. Thus it has come about that Minnesota has had four Scandinavian governors and Wisconsin one, with many other administrative officers. Thirteen Scandinavians have been Representatives in Congress, two have reached the United States Senate, and several have attained ministerial rank in the diplomatic service as a reward for loyal and efficient party activity. But it must in fairness be said that the dignity, prestige, and repeated successes of such men as Senator Knute Nelson and Governor John A. Johnson of Minnesota were the result of real ability and genuine Americanism rather than of adventitious political advantage arising out of Scandinavian origin.

The party affiliations of the Scandinavian voters, broadly speaking, have been steadily Republican ever since the organization of that party, but the leaven of independent voting, beginning with the first defection, about 1880, to the Greenback party, has worked with uncertain periodicity and varying strength. Here it is the Free-silver heresy which divides them, as it did other classes of voters; there it is the Farmers' Alliance or the Populist principle. Again, a law for compulsory education, in the English language—the Bennett Law of 1889 in Wisconsin—led to a strange temporary alliance between the Irish and German Roman Catholics on the one hand

¹⁰ *Fædrelandet og Emigranten*, June 9, 30, 1870.

¹¹ *The North*, July 10, 1889, translating from *Posten og Vesten*.

and the Scandinavian Lutherans on the other, and the election of a Democratic governor in Wisconsin. Each such excursion from the old parties, though followed by a return of the majority to the old allegiance, has strengthened the tendency to independent voting until at the present time, upon questions like the tariff, currency, and legislation for control of railroads and other great corporations, and local option or prohibition, the Scandinavian independent vote makes any election in the middle Northwest a matter of real uncertainty. Roosevelt carried Minnesota by a plurality of 161,000, yet Johnson, the Swedish Democratic candidate for governor, was elected by a small plurality. In 1908 Minnesota re-elected Johnson for a third term by a plurality of 20,000, at the same time giving Taft 85,000.

Turning to the effect of the Scandinavian element upon society in general, it is safe to say that in no case, save perhaps in the matter of the percentage of insane in state hospitals, has it exercised any disintegrating or retarding influence. The statistics of crime and pauperism for the six states containing Scandinavians in great numbers are strikingly favorable; the percentage of offences due to intemperance is not notably higher in such Scandinavian counties as Chisago and Goodhue in Minnesota, or in cities like Rockford, Illinois, and Madison, Wisconsin, or in the densely Scandinavian wards of Chicago, Minneapolis, and St. Paul, than in similar areas peopled by Germans or native Americans. The deep and abiding loyalty of the Norwegians and Swedes to the public-school system has been noteworthy since the early days of their settlement. While in a very few instances the Lutheran church has attempted year-long parish schools, it has usually confined itself to vacation schools for instruction in religion and the mother tongue, and to attempts to build up seminaries and colleges for advanced instruction under the direction of the various branches into which the Lutheran church, especially among the Norwegians, has become divided.

The Scandinavian immigrants, from the beginnings of their movement into the promise of the American West, have dedicated themselves, without reservation and without stipulation, to the interests and institutions of the Republic. Neither educational nor property qualifications, nor any other reasonable restrictions on immigration, would much affect the number of arrivals. They come to the New World to stay and to make homes in the old-fashioned sense of the word; they are racially akin to the best in America; they are mentally and temperamentally detached from Old World dogmas, castes, and animosities; they are educated, hard-working, ambitious, and law-abiding, and permanently quickened by the conditions of

American life. Their contribution to the social structure of the commonwealth will be strength and stability rather than beauty and the delicate refinements of culture. They are not likely to furnish great leaders, but they will be in the front rank of those who follow men of light and of spiritual force. They will be builders and contributors, not destroyers; their greatest and most enduring services will be as a subtle, steadying influence, reinforcing those high qualities which are sometimes called Puritan, sometimes American, but which in any case make for local and national peace, prosperity, enlightenment, and righteousness.

KENDRIC CHARLES BABCOCK.